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HEROIC INCIDENTS IN THE LIFE
OF GENERAL FRANCIS MARION

Heriot Clarkson

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GENERAL FRANCIS MARION



ADDRESS DELIVERED AT THE BANQUET OF THE SOCIETY OF THE
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HERIOT CLARKSON



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LIFE OF GENERAL FRANCIS MARION

MR. TOASTMASTER: It has been truthfully said that two-thirds of the battles of the Revolution were fought on Southern soil and two-thirds of those were fought in the Carolinas. Next to George Washington, a celebrated writer gives it as his opinion, that Francis Marion was the greatest General of the Revolution.

He was of Huguenot descent. Unwilling to bend his knee, but firm in the Protestant faith, his ancestor was forced, under threat of death, to leave home and native land, Sunny France, and for conscience's sake he sought his fortunes far across the great Atlantic in the wilderness of South Carolina. The scion of a resolute race, General Marion's moral firmness, strategy and courage, together with his secrecy and success in the conduct of his campaigns, have cast around his name and fame a halo of romance and glory that few leaders have ever attained. Even to this day the deeds of "Marion's Brigade" are famous in poetry and prose. President Roosevelt only a few years ago appealed to the patriotism of the South and bid for its loyalty to him by referring to the fact that one of his ancestors was one of "Marion's men." Marion's life was full of dangers and exploits. At the age of sixteen he was ship-wrecked, and he and his companions for six days were without food, except that of a dog that had followed them to the boat from the sinking ship.

Marion's first military service was in the war with the Cherokees and during the war in 1761. Even then his conduct and that of his men almost equaled the heroism of Leonidas and his brave band of Spartans at the Pass of

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Thermopylae. When near the Indian village of Etchoe, Indians were observed upon the heights. Under these heights lay the line of march, which it was necessary for the army to pursue in their advance and the men would thus be exposed to a murderous fire from the Indians concealed by the rocks and trees on each side, all of which rendered this pass of Etchoe the most difficult and dangerous defile in the Indian country. It was necessary to dislodge them. The man of the hour was Marion with a band of thirty. He and his men advanced up the hill and entered the defile. The Indians fired upon the attacking party and twenty-one were killed. Marion was unhurt, he and some of the others being saved by the rapid advance of the next detachment.

The Indians were vanquished and their town of Etchoe was reduced to ashes. We see this heroic spirit looking at the ruins and soliloquizing. "I saw," he says, "everywhere around the footsteps of the little Indian children, where they had lately played under the shade of this rustling corn. No doubt they had often looked up with joy to their swelling shocks, and gladdened when they thought of their abundant cakes for the coming winter. When we are gone, thought I, they will return, and peeping through the weeds with tearful eyes, will mark the ghastly ruin poured over their homes and happy fields where they had so often played. 'Who did this?' they will ask their mothers. 'The white people did it,' the mothers reply, 'the Christians.'"

He in that hour, generations ago, taught again the lesson to mankind that the conquering force of the Christian was not the sword, but love.

As soon as the General Committee of Safety of South Carolina heard of the battle of Lexington, they raised several companies, and Captain Marion was placed in command of one. In the first act of hostilities in the Southern warfare Marion took a leading part—the capture of Fort Johnson near Charleston. He also took a leading part in the memorable defense of Fort Sullivan, June 28, 1776—a battle that

gave great confidence to the American colonies. The last shot, which played havoc with the British Commodore's ship, was fired by Marion. It was at this battle that the brave Jasper picked up the flag shot away and placed it on the rampart under a galling fire.

We next see Marion at the siege of Savannah under Count D'Estaing. Under the pretext of negotiating, Prevost got D'Estaing to give him twenty-four hours in which to determine whether he would surrender the city. In the meantime he received reinforcements. Marion was furious at the delay. "My God," he exclaimed, "who ever heard of anything like this before? First allow an enemy to entrench and then fight him! See the destruction brought upon the British at Bunker Hill, and yet our troops there were only militia, raw, half-armed clod-hoppers, and not a mortar, nor carronade, nor even a swivel—but only their ducking guns. What then are we to expect from our regulars—completely armed with a choice train of artillery, and covered by a breast-work? For my own part, when I look upon my brave fellows around me, it wrings me to the heart to think how near most of them are to their bloody graves." Marion did his best in the siege, but the Americans failed and the brave Jasper was slain.

We next see him in Charleston. Marion was averse to every species of intemperance. He was invited to a dinner party. The host insisted on his guests drinking. Marion refused and determined not to submit to this. The door was locked, but he jumped from the second-story window of the house and this broke his ankle. He had to go to his plantation after the injury, and thus escaped capture when Charleston fell.

Next we see him and a small command joining General Gates and his splendid army. The poor appearance of Marion and his men was the subject of ridicule by the regular soldiers. Pride comes before a fall. Gates and his men were defeated disgracefully at Camden, and Marion became the hero of the South.

After the defeat of Gates the Carolinas seemed almost lost to the cause; but in this hour of darkness to the American cause, there was formed the now famous "Marion Brigade." William Cullen Bryant starts his poem on Marion's Brigade in these words:

"Our band is few, but true and tried,
Our leader frank and bold,
The British soldier trembles,
When Marion's name is told."

Marion took charge of this brigade on August 10, 1780, when he was forty-eight years old. He wore a leather cap, part of the uniform of the second regiment, with a silver crescent in front, inscribed with the words, "Liberty or Death."

All are acquainted with a familiar incident at Snow Island in the swamps, his rendezvous. He there offered a British captive sweet potatoes and water—his only diet—and when the British prisoner was exchanged he returned to England and refused to fight against such a patriot.

The fiery Tarleton, who could not catch him, dubbed him the "Swamp Fox." On one occasion Marion was almost surrounded by British dragoons in an open field, and his only hope of escape was to have his horse leap a high fence and a four-foot ditch on the opposite side. His splendid horse cleared the fence and ditch, and Marion, bidding the British "good-morning," made good his escape. For his gallant conduct at Eutaw Springs, Congress thanked him.

The bravest soldier is the most generous to his foe. In the Senate after the war, Marion refused to vote for the "Confiscation Act"—taking the property of the Tories to meet the public wants.

At another time a bill was introduced in the Senate relieving Marion and others from legal responsibility for using private property during the war. Marion had his name excepted and said: "If I have given any occasion for complaint, I am ready to answer in person or property. If I have wronged any man, I am willing to make restitution."

Many other heroic incidents could be given if time would permit, but let me close with three beautiful tributes. Keating Simons, who was Marion's Brigade-Major, says:

"In the year 1782, when the British troops were preparing to evacuate Charleston, they had a covering party on James Island to protect their wood-cutters, and another on Lamprere's point to protect their getting water for their shipping. Colonel Kosciusko, a Polander (the distinguished patriot), solicited General Greene to afford him an opportunity of distinguishing himself; and as the covering party to the wood-cutters was the only one which now presented itself, the General gave him a command to attack them, which he did, and was defeated with the loss of a great many men, and among the slain was the gallant Wilmot. About the same time that General Greene gave Kosciusko this command he wrote General Marion that he understood the watering party at Lamprere's point was so situated as to afford him an opportunity of attacking it with success. General Marion replied that he had not overlooked the situation of the British at that spot, but he viewed the war in Carolina as over; and as the enemy were preparing to go away he had sent a party to protect them from being annoyed by his own men; that he commanded his fellow-citizens who had already shed blood enough in the cause of freedom, and that he would not spill another drop of it, now when it was unnecessary—no, not for the highest honors that could be conferred upon him."

General Greene pays Marion this tribute:

"When I consider how much you have done and suffered and under what disadvantage you have maintained your ground, I am at loss which to admire most, your courage or fortitude, or your address and management. Certain it is, no man has a better claim to the public thanks than you have. History affords no instance wherein an officer has kept possession of a country under so many disadvantages as you have. Surrounded on every side with a superior force, hunted from every quarter with veteran troops, you have found means to

elude their attempts and to keep alive the expiring hopes of an oppressed militia, when all succor seemed to be cut off. To fight the enemy bravely with the prospect of victory is nothing, but to fight with intrepidity under the constant impression of a defeat, and to inspire irregular troops to do it, is a talent peculiar to yourself. Nothing will give me greater pleasure than to do justice to your merit, and I shall miss no opportunity of declaring to Congress, to the Commander-in-Chief of the American Army, and to the world, the great sense I have of your merit and services."

Colonel Henry Lee (father of the Confederate chieftain), who served with Marion, says of him:

"Small in stature, hard in visage, healthy, abstemious and taciturn, enthusiastically wedded to the cause of liberty, he deeply deplored the condition of his beloved country. The common weal was his sole object; nothing selfish, nothing mercenary soiled his ermine character. Fertile in stratagem, he struck unperceived; and, retiring to those hidden retreats selected by himself in the morasses of the Pee Dee and Black Rivers, he placed his corps not only out of the reach of his foe, but often out of the discovery of his friends. A rigid disciplinarian, he reduced to practice the justice of his heart; and during the difficult course of warfare through which he passed, calumny, itself never charged him with violating the rights of persons, property or humanity. Never avoiding danger, he never rashly sought it; and acting for all around him as he did for himself, he risked the lives of his troops only when it was necessary. Neither elated with prosperity, nor depressed by adversity, he preserved an equanimity which won the admiration of friends and exacted the respect of his enemies."

Can higher tribute be paid to any man? Such was the hero who with McDowell, Morgan, Davidson, Lee, Sumter, Pickens and others did so much to redeem the South. We here take leave of these patriots' examples and commend them to the youth of all ages.

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